

# VESTRY PAPERS

January / February 2010

**ecf** EPISCOPAL  
CHURCH FOUNDATION  
empowering congregations

*To inspire, affirm and inform Episcopal leaders in their work*

## *"I could fill this job in about a week!"*

by Gary Gleason

"Why should we spend a year trying to get a new minister? I could fill this job in about a week!" the vestry member proclaimed. "Yes," I replied, "but it's not a good idea."

Experience consistently shows that calling a new rector too soon may result in a shorter, and often unhappy, tenure for the priest, and a focus on immediate needs rather than a long term strategy for the congregation. While choosing leadership for a church is similar to secular search processes in some ways, it is also vastly different.

It is a spiritual process. It is a prime time for renewal in the congregation. It is a time when new leadership comes forth and new connections are made with the bishop and the wider diocesan community. It is also a time to review and restate the hopes and dreams of the parish. That doesn't happen in a week.

When a rector or priest leaves, reactions are varied. Some are glad and can't wait to see the moving van pull out of town. Some are outraged that the vestry didn't do more to keep the priest happy and in place. Others are shocked because the only person they have ever experienced as their pastor is gone. Still others think they now have the opportunity to fix what needs fixing. And sometimes ghosts from the past swoop in with unresolved issues and hurts from years ago.

### **Healing unresolved hurts**

One diocesan search consultant and former senior warden in Minnesota, who started out strongly against the idea of an interim, became a convert after he saw what happened in his own parish. "We had lived with the negative image of our priest who, back in 1982, was removed under a cloud.

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*This Issue:  
Congregations in Transition*

*Clergy transitions in the life of a congregation can be, and usually are, full of anxiety and progressive steps.*

*But done well, they can also provide a time of healing and grace so that when a new priest is called, the congregation is healthy, self-sustaining and unified. This issue of Vestry Papers looks at both the possibilities and the challenges inherent in such a time.*



Stan Sholik Photo

*The choice of a new rector is a necessary but often arduous process. Above, the Rev. Norm Freeman, right, is installed as rector of St. George's Episcopal Church, Laguna Hills, California.*

*Inside: A Warden's  
Survival Guide*



Congregations often research and write a parish profile as part of the transition process. Lynne Davis, former search committee chair at Trinity Church, Princeton, notes that full and fair disclosure is critical to success. "Remember that this is for clergy candidates and they need to know the truth, as do parishioners. Nothing should be disguised if there are real issues."

Next issue:  
Welcoming Newcomers

# A warden's guide: Surviving the process

by Anne Burns

**Do you like me?** This is the time to have wardens who like each other. There will be enough stress without personality clashes.

*I can be all things to all people* — well, no, you can't. Wardens should not serve as members/chairs of the profile or search committees. Your responsibility is to keep the place running during this critical time. It will be a full time job.

**Choose wisely.** The wardens choose the members of the profile and the search committees. Make sure there is representation from all of the church constituencies. Keep it balanced by age, gender, service attended, newcomers, old-timers, etc.

**Be strategic.** You are warden for a reason. You are respected in the parish, you know where the bodies are buried, you should be aware of potential mines. There will be folks who KNOW MORE, KNOW BETTER, KNOW WHO SHOULD BE THE NEXT RECTOR, KNOW THAT THIS IS TAKING TOO LONG and KNOW THAT THIS IS NOT HOW WE DID IT LAST TIME. Bring some of them into the process — a representative from this group should be on the profile committee, not on the search committee.

**Communicate.** Keep the parish informed about what is going on — even when there is not much to report. You can say the same thing ten times and still people will say they never heard it.

**Be a cheerleader!** Say thank you to the staff — this is a very stressful time for them. Say

thank you to volunteers! Be present — this is time for wardens to be Marthas, not Marys.

**Listen.** Parishioners need to let you know what their concerns are, how they are feeling. After you listen, say thank you for sharing this information. Don't make promises.

**Use your diocesan resources.** Some of us have a tendency to sort of forget that we aren't the first church to be in this situation...that there may be others who can help. Use that help.

**Clean house.** This is the time to look critically at your church, get some work done. Is your membership list based in reality? Look at your staff — is it time to make some changes? You can be a true friend to your next rector if you make some tough decisions now so that he or she isn't faced with the secretary who should have retired several years earlier.

**Pray.** Pray particularly for patience and a sense of humor.

Think of this time as the longest Advent season you have ever experienced — you are preparing the way for the new rector, for a time of growth and renewal for the church. It is good time, time worth spending.

*As of January 1, 2010, Anne Burns finished her term as senior warden at Trinity Church, Princeton, New Jersey. Her remarks, along with Jim Sell's, were initially prepared for the Consortium of Endowed Parishes.*

*Almighty God, giver of every good gift: look graciously on your Church, and so guide the minds of those who shall choose a rector for this parish, that we may receive a faithful pastor, who will care for your people and equip us for our ministries; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.  
(Book of Common Prayer, page 818)*

# *"I could fill this job in about a week!"*

*continued from page 1*

During the search process, our interim rector helped us understand how that episode was still defining our image as a parish family. Now that we have faced into that and have a new rector, we are making progress in ways we never did for twenty-five years!"

It is important to discuss the varying viewpoints about the previous rector, because a parish's experience and reaction to the departing rector is instructive about what to seek in a new priest. However tempting it is to overlook this — "It's in the past, it's over with, let's just move on" — such an approach leaves unresolved issues.

## **Sharing collective wisdom**

In dealing with all of this, the bishop or a diocesan representative can be helpful to a congregation. They have recent experience assisting other congregations and can share that collective wisdom with the vestry or search committee. With the assistance of an interim rector, the parish community develops a clear vision and a sense of spiritual leadership needed for the future — while helping the regular and ongoing work of the congregation to continue so that an intentional, deliberate, search process will identify the next rector.

## **The Spirit is at work**

During the interim the congregation is asked to help the vestry and search committee describe itself, often by means of a questionnaire or small group discussions. This discernment helps create a parish profile describing priestly skills the congregation needs. It also helps potential candidates understand the parish, its hopes and desires.

Sometimes parishioners feel like nothing is happening or that "it is taking too long to get a new priest," but this is when the Spirit is at work. Confidential interviewing, background and references checks occur, and the search committee narrows the field of candidates. Details and specifics are not appropriate to share, yet the search committee and vestry must insure that communication with the congregation happens during this time.

In the end the search committee (usually) recommends to the vestry the candidate selected to become the next rector. The vestry then issues the call and preparations begin for welcoming the new rector and

continuing the good ministry underway in the congregation.

When the vestry issues a call to the next rector, new leaders have come forth. There is a new understanding of being a parish of the diocese, the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion. An interim rector has helped make some adjustments in daily rhythm of parish life, allowing a new rector to hit the ground running. The congregation



has clarity about how the new priest is well qualified and has been prayerfully selected. The new rector can commit to this new trust and responsibility and the congregation can agree to support and uphold the new priest in this ministry.

Could that happen in a week? No way.

*Gary Gleason, former Canon to the Ordinary in the Diocese of Minnesota, now works with bishops and dioceses of the Episcopal Church through the Episcopal Church Center in New York. To reach him, email: GFG17@aol.com*



*Search processes can be draining. "If you are a warden, you may need to find someplace other than the parish to feed your spiritual life during the search process," says Cathy Carpenter, former senior warden during a clergy search at St. Paul's on-the-Hill, St. Paul, Minnesota. "Also consider finding a spiritual director or soul friend with whom you can debrief about the experience."*



# Interim rectorship: Shalts and shalt nots

by Jim Sell

**Thou shalt...**be a big booster of the work of the Profile Committee. This is such a vital step in the process toward finding the person God is preparing to call into a new ministry. Without the widest participation of the congregation in the initial process, mistakes are more likely to happen.

**Thou shalt...**encourage more lay leadership. All too often, the last rector might have simply found it easier to “do it him/herself.” You do the new rector a big favor if you can move the congregation away from that thinking. It is their church, not the rector’s. They need to “own” it.

**Thou shalt...**offer the congregation a new model of ministry that is different from the past, without denigrating that past. The new rector will be yet a third model, so you are preparing the way for him/her to live within his/her predilections.

**Thou shalt...**be a teacher, reintroducing the congregation to what it means to be an Episcopalian, a Christian, a part of a spiritual community. There is no better time to go back to the basics, no matter how strong the adult Christian education program has been.

**Thou shalt...**be a clear supporter of the bishop and diocesan staff. An interim period is prime time for renewing relationships and you can broker a healthful spirit. Also, being a cheerleader for the wider Episcopal Church is a good thing at this time.

**Thou shalt...**do all in your power to create a solid financial ground upon which a new rector can build institutional health. It is not onerous to encourage a retrenching of some programs, so the new rector can build afresh.

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*According to Victoria Duncan, program officer for the Office for Transition Ministry at the Episcopal Church Center, current trends indicate that the number of full time positions for clergy is decreasing, with the number of part time positions increasing. The number of retired clergy is also increasing significantly. Some 700 full time positions are filled each year nationally.*

MILESTONE 5  
A VIEW FROM THE TOP  
The mountain top  
We know ourselves to be the church  
Who then shall lead us?  
What do we do next?

MILESTONE 4  
UP THE MOUNTAIN  
The work of self-study  
The search committee begins  
Learning sessions for times of transition  
The flow of information: collecting, collating and distributing  
How to read CDO profiles  
The position profile and the parish profile

MILESTONE 3  
FIRST STEPS  
We make our first steps together  
Telling our story  
The transition committee  
The nominating committee  
The election of a search committee

MILESTONE 2  
OUR COMPANIONS ALONG THE WAY  
Working together  
The appointment of interim clergy  
The appointment of a search consultant

MILESTONE 1  
THE JOURNEY BEGINS  
The Bishop calls the parish to the journey  
The priest departs  
Saying goodbye  
Healthy change

## The Journey: Calling

# Reaching for that trapeze bar

by Mike Ehmer

Through divine intervention and God's Spirit guiding Moses' leadership, Pharaoh was finally persuaded to let the Israelites go. After 430 years of living in Egypt, the enslaved Israelites experienced a change when they left the land of their oppressors in one day. But it took them another forty years to make the transition to their new home. The former was a single event; the later was a process.

Congregations experience a similar situation when there is a transition in ordained leadership. It begins with a rather quick change (the rector's departure) and is followed by a much longer transitional period that lasts until the congregation establishes a new normal, a time of feeling settled again.

Changes and transitions are a part of life for individuals and congregations. Sometimes

they are quick and easy; other times lengthy and complex. And our responses to changes and transitions in congregational life vary because our understanding of them is influenced by our experiences and individual temperament.

## Transitions produce anxiety

Transitions in ordained leadership usually produce great anxiety in congregations. There are suddenly many new questions: What will change? Who will replace the departing individual in both the short and long term? How long will it take to find a replacement? What kind of alterations will the new persons (including the interim) want to initiate?

As the Israelites did in their wilderness experience, congregations may balk at the changes inherent in a transition. In a quest



*There's a lot of talent among recently retired clergy — and congregations without clergy who are yearning to grow and thrive and not just wait for their next priest. A pilot project called New Dreams - New Visions is being launched to help small congregations try new ministry possibilities with clergy who have energy, experience and wisdom to spare for a year or two. Contact Victoria Duncan at [vduncan@episcopalchurch.org](mailto:vduncan@episcopalchurch.org)*

### MILESTONE 6

#### DOWN THE MOUNTAIN

Preparing to interview the candidates  
Completing the parish profile  
Preparing the parish information packet  
Preparing the candidate list  
The search committee receives the candidate list

### MILESTONE 7

#### THE HOME STRETCH

First impressions  
Meeting the candidates: The interviews  
References and second and third interviews  
The vestry receives the short list  
The vestry interviews the finalists and discerns the call  
Letter of agreement and announcing the call

### MILESTONE 8

#### A NEW BEGINNING

Exit interview with interim priest  
New priest arrives!  
Celebration of new ministry  
Transition program

### MILESTONE 9

A YEAR LATER  
(9-12 months later)  
Review of mission and ministry

## A Priest To Your Parish

Text adapted from "Calling a Priest to Your Parish," Diocese of Connecticut

# Reaching for that trapeze bar

*continued from page 5*

for comfort and normalcy in the midst of confusion, members may grumble and complain about the changes or even attempt to march ahead in unhelpful ways (building their own forms of a golden calf).

It is also difficult to let go of things that have been comforting to congregations, or that have been the norm for so long, without having something else to sustain them. It is like a trapeze artist letting go of one bar and floating through the air before he or she

change, keeping the congregation focused on its mission. After all, the church is still there even though the rector has departed.

There are some specific things vestries can do to ease the transition.

- Pray without ceasing for strength and guidance, and encourage the congregation to do the same.
- Help the departing rector make a good “exit,” acknowledging the joint ministry that has taken place.



grabs hold of the next bar. As uncomfortable as that position may be, the space between the trapeze bars has proven to be an opportune time for a congregation to accept the change, to learn new things, to be open to new possibilities and to grow.

It took the Israelites forty years to make their transition. Fortunately, congregational transitions are much shorter. The transition begins when the cleric announces his or her departure and continues until about eighteen months after the replacement is in place, usually resulting in a total transition time of two to three years.

## Staying calm

Vestries leading in times of transition can take a few tips from Moses. Their first responsibility is to stay calm in the midst of

- Provide time to share the history of the congregation, identifying those things the congregation wants to carry forward into the future and those that can be left behind.
- Share their understanding of the differences between “change” and “transition” and prepare the congregation for the time it will take for things to seem “normal” again.
- Allow for experimentation — it will help the congregation prepare for the changes any new leader brings and may spark new ideas about ways of being “church”.
- At the same time, avoid unnecessary changes — too many changes raise the anxiety level.

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*Some facts: There are some two million baptized members in the Episcopal Church, some 7000 congregations, approximately 9000 active clergy, and approximately 4100 retired clergy. At the time this issue went to press, 134 open positions for clergy were posted nationally. Other positions, mostly part time or local, are posted only on a diocesan level.*

# Interim rectorship: Shalts and shalt nots

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**Thou shalt...**be responsive to the Discernment Committee, but not nosy. You can answer questions of procedure, process and church etiquette, but their work is none of your business, even if they try to co-opt you.

**Thou shalt...**let the senior warden chair vestry meetings. It signals your lack of authority.

**Thou shalt...**expect to be paid about the same as the last rector or the new rector, whichever is more. This may mean the reconfiguring of the salary package to fulfill your requirements.

**Thou shalt...**claim no honors. The interim period is not about you. It is about re-creation of the life and spirit of the congregation. Lavish praise on those who have earned it and be pleased with your modesty.

**Thou shalt...**honor the fundamentals of ministry: stewardship, worship, adult and children's education, evangelism, outreach and pastoral care. That is a full enough plate.

**Thou shalt...**be hope-filled. Many congregations have a rather low corporate self-esteem. They cannot imagine that anyone "good" will want to come to their church as rector. They simply cannot see the treasure they hold in their hands. They need to be honestly and appropriately reassured that they are the body of Christ and, therefore, of great value.

**Thou shalt not...**promote or run down any candidate. Churches are small communities. If you hear rumors, keep them to yourself, or, express yourself to the diocesan deployment officer or bishop. You really might

learn something that someone needs to know, but it is not your job to interfere.

**Thou shalt not...**promote yourself as a candidate for rector, no matter how much you are appreciated. Many will love you but, there is a whole "other side" out there that will not be happy that you are a candidate. Among other things, they will know you tried to manipulate the process. After you have done your job with integrity, leave.

**Thou shalt not...**trash the old rector. Probably, that person tried as hard as he/she could. Being a rector is not an easy job. Criticism is easy to generate and hard to bury. Restoring affection for the old rector can be a blessing to the life of the church.

**Thou shalt not...**be an enabler. On the other hand, maybe the rector was a disaster and committed serious breaches of professional standards. You must be pastorally sensitive with those who are wounded. But, where the rector is concerned, that is the bishop's problem. Not yours. Your job is to be a healer of the congregation and move forward.

**Thou shalt not...**dismiss any staff member without due process. Yes, they serve "at the pleasure of the rector," but you are not the rector. You are the interim. You may think that is a "tradition." It isn't. Yet, perhaps some staff members may have to leave. Be sure you know what you are doing and be surrounded by skilled personnel people.

*After some forty years in parish ministry, the Rev. Jim Sell is now the interim rector of Trinity Church on the Green in New Haven, Connecticut, and was the interim rector for Trinity Church, Princeton, when this article was prepared.*



*It can be confusing, at least initially! The process for congregations in transition varies from diocese to diocese, and even congregation to congregation. There is much help available from dioceses, resources and consultants, so don't despair. And there is also divine help. God has had a lot of experience(!) in the area of calling people, both laity and clergy, to service.*

## Resources for congregations in transition

**Fresh Start:** A diocesan-led program that seeks to foster healthy relationships among clergy, their congregations and their dioceses during critical periods of transition in clergy leadership. Special emphasis on helping clergy and congregations get off on the right foot. Sponsors: The Episcopal Church Foundation, CREDO, The Episcopal Church. [www.freshstart.org](http://www.freshstart.org)

**Appreciative Inquiry:** A increasingly popular approach that helps individuals and congregations grow their strengths rather than focusing on weaknesses. Consultants, materials and conferences offered for both clergy and congregations in interim situations. [www.clergyleadership.com](http://www.clergyleadership.com)

**The Office for Transition Ministry, Episcopal Church Center, New York:** Known for many years as the Church Deployment Office (CDO), the office has assisted every diocese in developing a process for congregations seeking new priestly leadership as well as serving as a clearinghouse for clergy and lay professional deployment. [www.episcopalchurch.org/cdo.htm](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/cdo.htm)



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**Subscriptions**

\$40 annually. Mailed in packages of 15 copies per issue. \$30 annually for electronic version. Published in January, March, May, July, September and November.

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815 Second Avenue  
New York, NY 10017

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[www.EpiscopalFoundation.org](http://www.EpiscopalFoundation.org)

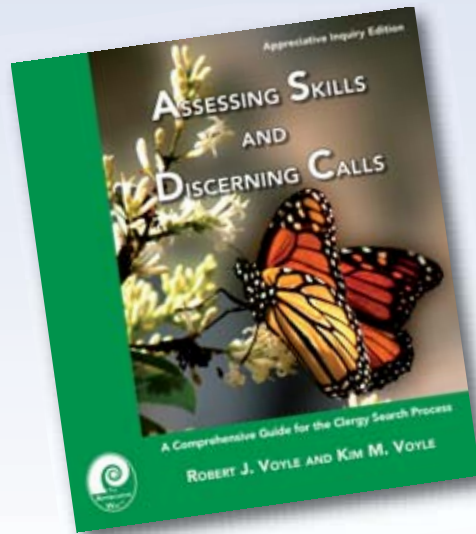
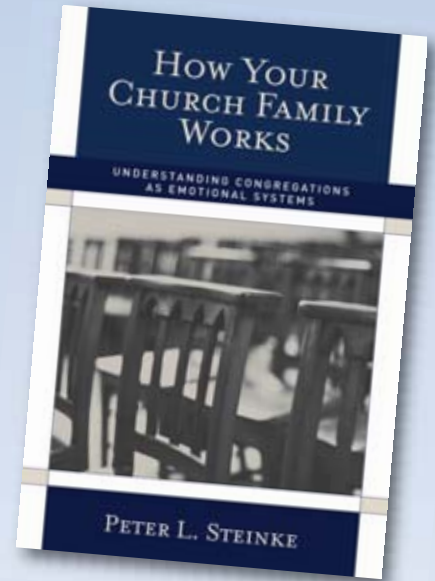
## Reader's Corner

### *How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems*

by Peter L. Steinke

All change produces anxiety in congregations. Understanding the complex interaction of emotional processes is key for those who lead through times of change. Peter Steinke's time-honored classic provides insights into what is really going on in how we relate and live together as the church, and gives tools for healthier ways of living through transitions.

Alban Institute  
[www.alban.org](http://www.alban.org)



### *Assessing Skills and Discerning Calls*

Robert and Kim Voyle

This comprehensive, 380-page guide for the clergy search process includes a substantial section on designing and implementing an appreciative inquiry-based transitional ministry and provides a firm foundation for the clergy search process. Hot off the press in late 2009.

[www.clergyleadership.com/search/assessing-discerning.html](http://www.clergyleadership.com/search/assessing-discerning.html)

## Reaching for that trapeze bar

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- When the new rector arrives, plan time to mutually clarify roles and expectations and agree to a Mutual Ministry Review at the end of the first year.

Above all, LISTEN — just as Moses spent time walking among the campfires and sitting down with the people, vestries need to be especially available at this time.

Much like Moses needed advice from his father-in-law, Jethro, search committees, transition teams, diocesan staff members and/or consultants can provide vestries help and advice during the transitional time.

Vestry members can help their congregations manage the anxiety of transition by under-

standing these issues. They can reassure members that anxiety is a normal part of the process, and promote the wilderness time as one of the best times to learn and grow, to reassess priorities and mission. A good knowledge of the issues of transition will help vestries and clerics be better attuned to the leading of the Holy Spirit while they are reaching for that next trapeze bar.

*The Rev. Mike Ehmer is the Assistant Director of CREDO Institute, Inc. and the Managing Director of Fresh Start, a resource for clergy and congregations in transition. Learn more about Fresh Start at [www.episcopalfreshstart.org](http://www.episcopalfreshstart.org)*